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The Historical Study of Religions in Universities and Colleges.—By MORRIS JASTROW, JR., Professor in the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Penna.

To those who recognize the importance of the historical study of religions, and who are earnestly interested in encouraging researches which are necessary in this field, it is somewhat depressing to find that the subject has found an entrance into the curriculum of but a very small number of our colleges and universities. So far as I am aware, there are but two institutions, the University of Chicago and Cornell University, which have established chairs for the study of religions, and in neither of these institutions has the subject been accorded the dignity of a special chair. At Chicago it is combined with the Professorship of Ancient History, at Cornell with Christian Ethics. The objection to the former combination is that it imposes upon the occupant too wide a field to be satisfactorily covered by one person, while the association with Christian Ethics imposes a limitation in the choice for future occupants. At Harvard, courses falling within the domain of the history of religions are given regularly by Prof. Everett and Prof. Toy, and for a few years the subject was represented at Yale by Dr. Fairbanks. A number of theological seminaries include this study in their curriculum,¹ and special mention must be made of the example set by the Andover Theological Seminary in making fuller and more adequate provisions for instruction in it than are found elsewhere. But these are only a few institutions, and it is significant that even at our leading university, Harvard, a chair for the historical study of religion does not exist. Courses have occasionally and sporadically been introduced at other colleges and universities than the ones named, as at the University of Pennsylvania; but it is evident that without special and perma-

¹ E. g. the Wesleyan Theological College, Montreal, Canada. For a full indication of what colleges and universities and seminaries have done to advance the historical study of Religions, see an article by the writer, "Recent Movements in the Historical Study of Religions in America," in *The Biblical World*, i. 24-32.

nent provision no useful and lasting work can be accomplished. It is not very difficult to discover the reasons for this defect in the college and university curriculum. In the first place, there still lurks considerable prejudice against the subject. It is idle to conceal the fact that in many quarters there is a fear lest by introducing the subject into our institutions of learning we may be involved in misunderstandings or into direct controversy with the varied religious interests represented in these institutions, and it is considered as not lying beyond the range of possibility that even the opposition of people interested in matters of practical religion might be encountered. This prejudice and this fear are factors which must be taken into consideration, and it cannot be said that they are wholly unfounded. One can easily conceive how an occupant of a chair for the study of religions, through lack of tact or the display of poor judgment, might directly bring about the evils indicated. But still, while the subject is one which touches the important concerns of life more closely than others, it will be admitted that the study of religions is by no means the only one which requires to be handled with care and delicacy in an American college or university. In view of occurrences still fresh in the minds of all in connection with the present controversy on the money question, we are justified in including the study of Political Economy among such delicate subjects. Philosophy, likewise, may be denominated a thorny field, in which professors are apt to have their fingers pricked; and even Biology is not without its danger points. As a matter of fact, there is less reason to fear complications through the introduction of the study of religions in a university curriculum than in the case of some of the subjects named. The greater part, by far, of the field of study worked by the one who is interested in investigating the phenomena of religious life belongs to the past and not to the present. Advanced religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism offer comparatively little opportunity for investigating the fundamental problems involved in religion viewed as a part of man's life. For understanding such problems we must turn to religions which are more naïve, which are less the result of conscious effort, in which speculation plays a minor part, which, in a word, are *direct* manifestations of man's emotional or religious nature. The religion of savages and of people living in a primitive condition of culture are the more special concern of the student of religions. The customs prevail-

ing in advanced religions are of comparatively little interest until they can be connected with such as form part of the life of primitive man ; and so far as the doctrines of the great religions of the present are concerned, they are so far removed from the religious views held by man in an early state of culture, and their source is so utterly different, that there would be but little opportunity of touching upon them in the courses which would be mapped out for college and university studies. But even where the present religions in which we are more particularly interested are dealt with, the historical treatment furnishes a guarantee against the introduction of a controversial spirit. A scholar trained to pursue the investigation of a subject from an objective and critical point of view runs little risk of assuming the rôle of a special pleader. Further than this, it is needless to point out at this late date how utterly unfounded is the suspicion that in some mysterious way the study of religion conduces to a depreciation of the importance or sacredness of the religious life of man. Professor Tiele, the leading exponent of the historical study of religions, has well summed up the situation in the terse statement, "between pure science and true religion nothing but perfect and abiding harmony can prevail."¹ As a matter of course, this subject must be handled sympathetically, as must all subjects to which we may be devoting ourselves ; but this single condition presupposed, there is perhaps no better way of becoming impressed with the fact that religious emotions and aspirations, and the manifestation of these emotions and aspirations, form inalienable and permanent factors in the life of the individual as in the history of the nations than by a thorough and prolonged study of religious phenomena.

A second reason for the apparent indifference to the study of religions at our colleges and universities is to be sought in the comparative newness of the subject itself. Strange as it may seem, it is only within this century, and more particularly within the last decades, that proper methods for pursuing the study of religions have been devised. Prof. Max Müller, who may be called the founder of the modern school, is still with us, and Tiele, Réville, and Tylor, who may be ranged among the pioneers, are in the height of their activity. The historical study of religions is in a certain sense the child of comparative philology and the

¹ *Elements of the Science of Religion*, ii. (Edinburgh, 1899). Preface, vi.

foster child of archæology. Though in the last century, and even earlier, much material was contributed by travelers and historians for the study of the religious customs of nations, the revolution in method brought about by researches in the domain of comparative philology and by the opening up of hitherto unknown sources for the study of ancient history in Egypt, Chaldea, Phœnicia, Cyprus, and even Greece and Rome, has created an attitude towards religious phenomena which has practically resulted in producing a new discipline. In France and Holland the study has secured a permanent foothold ; in Paris there is a special section in the *École des Hautes Études* for the 'Sciences Religieuses,' while at the four Dutch universities chairs for the study of religions have been instituted. England has provided for the subject mainly through lecture foundations ; America has in a modest way followed the example of England, and there are indications at present that in Scotland a permanent chair will ere long be established. But with Germany, the great center of scholarship, practically indifferent to the entire discipline, it is perhaps not so surprising that American colleges and universities, which are largely swayed by Germany's example, should not yet have been aroused to a display of greater activity. In Germany there is a feeling, which is stronger in some sections of the country than in others, that the study of religions furnishes an open door to dilettantism. This feeling is justified ; and I regard the attraction which the subject offers to superficial minds, to those who are fond of taking a little dip into the well of knowledge, as one of its most serious drawbacks. It is difficult to say how far this dangerous attraction has influenced the authorities in American colleges and universities in their attitude towards the subject ; but so far as I can see there is but one way of counteracting this danger, and that is for our colleges and universities to take the subject in hand. If adequate provisions were made at our universities for students desirous of investigating the phenomena of religion, the difficulties involved in the proper study would soon be apparent, and would deter those from giving their crude results to the public who are now unrestrained through the lack of a scientific standard which can only be furnished by a college and university curriculum.

There is still a third reason that may be adduced to account for the slow progress which the study of religions is making in our institutions of learning, a reason which will be appreciated by all

who are acquainted with the severe struggle for existence from which the larger colleges and universities in this country are not spared. It is perhaps safe to assert that there is no institution of learning unfolding a healthy activity that is blessed with a superfluity of income. The complaint known as "lack of funds" appears to be a chronic one in American institutions of learning, and there are grounds for suspecting that it is a contagious disease. Only recently the Provost of the University of Pennsylvania unearthed one of the oldest documents in the archives, in which this complaint is diagnosed. The probabilities are that similar documents exist among the archives of other institutions. How to treat the bacillus of collegiate poverty is a problem which causes many sleepless nights to those practical bacteriologists, the College Presidents. With the many subjects already represented in our colleges and universities inadequately provided for, it is natural for the authorities to shrink from incurring additional responsibilities. The study of religions does not fairly come under the category of a crying need; and even the enthusiasts must not be misled into supposing that there may not be other subjects which have a prior claim to recognition in the present state of university development. For all that, it seems a pity that, where opportunities exist, some steps should not be taken to provide at least for a small beginning; and as a matter of fact, most of our large institutions are in a position to make more than a beginning without adding to their responsibility to any appreciable degree. It is almost an axiom to assert that the study of religions cannot be properly carried on by a single individual. The subject consists of numerous subdivisions for which the services of specialists are required. The method pursued in Paris, where an entire faculty is engaged in teaching the subject, must serve as an example to be followed. The religions of India can only be taught in a proper way by an Indologist, and, similarly, the religion of the Semites, of Egypt, of Judea, of Chaldea, of Greece, of Rome, must be placed in the hands of those who have fitted themselves to study these religions from their sources. In the same way, the religious phenomena in the life of the primitive man demand the attention of an anthropologist. At all our larger institutions these phases of the study of religions can be provided for; and since in most of our universities several persons are found representing the same subject, it is probable that

one of these will be interested in that phase of his subject which brings him into touch with the religious literature of the language assigned to him. As a matter of course, the study of religion at a college or university would be incomplete without some one to represent the general subject, but even without such a representative, something, indeed much, can be done.

I see no reason why our universities should not distinctly recognize among the graduate subjects fitting a man for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the study of a certain religion, which can be properly carried on by the student with the help of the professor within whose range fall the sources for the investigation of the religion in question. By silent consent, no doubt, all our leading universities would recognize such intention on the part of a student, but it is the direct and special recognition for which I am pleading. If we would encourage the study of a particular religion or particular religions, it is essential in the present missionary stage of the discipline for us to direct special attention to the possibilities which exist for the investigator. One is probably safe in saying that the natural tendency of a graduate student entering upon the study of a language other than French, English or German, will be to choose a philological theme; in rare instances, perhaps, a historical one; and only by way of exception will it be found that he has hit upon a subject dealing with the religious life of the people whose literature he is studying. The comparative newness of the study of religion, to which attention has been directed, as well as the obstacles which have prevented it from finding that recognition which it merits, demand that it should be specially fostered. The trustees of our universities should have their attention directed to it as a distinct field of investigation; and official recognition, I feel convinced, will add much toward encouraging the study. There is another way in which such explicit recognition will be useful. Despite the discouraging conditions upon which I have dwelt, it may still be maintained that there is considerable interest already manifested in the study of religions of this country, and there are indications that this interest is growing. If our universities will take care of the young child and tenderly foster its growth, there is every reason to believe that this general and growing interest in the study of religions will bring to the front persons who are ready to help the movement by providing the necessary endowment for that special chair without which the subject cannot be

adequately treated. The experience of the University of Chicago should serve as an encouragement; for one is probably not wrong in asserting that the attitude of its active President in recognizing the study of religions as an integral part of the university curriculum inspired the foundation of a special lectureship and of a museum for the study of religions.

Another advantage in making at least a beginning toward *official* recognition of the subject in the Graduate Department is the direct stimulus that it would afford to both professor and student. A professor's special field of research is to some extent, at least, determined by the courses which he announces, and if the custom be once established in connection with such subjects as Greek, Latin, Semitic, Sanscrit, Germanic and Romance Languages, of including opportunities for the study of the religion of the peoples whose language and literature we are engaged in interpreting, a direct motive will be furnished to a professor for taking up the investigation of some of the numerous problems in this field that arrest his attention. Students, likewise, will have their activities guided in a certain direction; and at all events the example of a proper method for a historical study of religion will be set before them. Professors in Philosophy and Ethics can be of great service in such a movement, and I firmly believe that much useful work will be accomplished even without the existence of a special chair for the historical and comparative investigation of religions in general, though such a chair will eventually be a necessity. By properly providing for the distribution of the subject among a large number of professorships we shall be reasonably certain of steering clear of the shoals of dilettantism. In a university course it would be an axiom that no particular religion can be studied except through direct recourse to the sources, and the student would soon learn that the general and comparative aspects of the subject will be of use to him only in broadening his mental horizon and in understanding the bearing of the particular religion in which he is primarily interested upon the general phenomena of religious life.

A few words remain to be said of the position of the subject in the college curriculum. Here, of course, there can be no question of training the student for original research, and it might therefore be argued that the study of religions has no proper place in a college course. Still, it will be admitted to be of some importance for a young man who is laying the foundations of culture

for his future career, that he should at least become acquainted with the general aspects of a phase of human life which he will meet at every turn in his studies as well as in practical affairs. The religious instruction in the churches needs to be supplemented by introducing the young man or woman to the part which religion has played in the history of civilization, and there is no reason why this cannot be done without coming into conflict with the doctrines of a particular denomination. For a young man or woman to leave college without a general knowledge of what such religions as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, stand for, not to speak of the history of Christianity, is certainly a lamentable defect, and one that is not without its influence upon the attitude of the present generation towards their own religion as well as towards religion in general. It is in the college, therefore, that the chair for the historical and comparative study of religions is indispensable, if any provision is to be made for the subject.

As already intimated, whatever interest there may be in the general public in favor of encouraging the historical study of religion at colleges and universities can only be brought out if our institutions of learning will take the initiative. I venture, therefore, to enter a plea for the recognition of the historical study of religion as a legitimate subject to be chosen by a student in an American university as part requirement for obtaining the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. For the present, and in a tentative manner, it might be put down as a minor subject, until adequate provisions be made to have it included in the higher rank of a major subject ; nor is it necessary that all the subdivisions of the subjects which could be furnished should actually be covered in the announcement of courses. It might be sufficient as a beginning to provide for the study of the religion of the Greeks or Romans, or Hebrews and Babylonians, or the religions of India, and as circumstances and experience warrant, other subdivisions could then be added ; but I feel convinced that not much progress in advancing the historical study of religion at colleges and universities can be expected from now on unless the question of *official* recognition is seriously taken up. It may be that in some institutions it will not be found expedient at present to further encroach upon the strength of the teaching force, or other reasons may exist which suggest postponement, but surely at many of our leading institutions these objections do not exist. With the example of France, Holland, and to a certain extent

England, before them, the authorities controlling the policy of our colleges and universities can certainly afford to take the subject under serious consideration, and indeed should feel prompted to do so.

The action of the American Oriental Society in establishing a special section for the historical study of religion is significant, not only as an endorsement of the importance of the subject but as a symptom. The step may properly be interpreted as an indication that the conditions are both ripe and favorable for taking further measures toward promoting this study in our leading institutions of learning, whose advance during the past two decades constitutes one of the most notable features in the intellectual development of this country.